



FACT SHEET

Module 6.3

Fatigue and Drowsy Driving

People often think that driver fatigue means falling asleep at the wheel. Falling asleep, however, is an extreme form of fatigue.

Fatigue is tiredness, weariness or exhaustion. You can be fatigued enough to impair your driving long before you “nod off” at the wheel. For example, when you are fatigued:

- your reactions are much slower,
- your ability to concentrate is reduced,
- it takes longer to interpret and understand the traffic situation.

Why is fatigue a problem?

The most common effects of fatigue on driving are:

- difficulty keeping your car within a lane,
- drifting off the road,
- more frequent and unnecessary changes in speed,
- not reacting in time to avoid a dangerous situation.

These effects lead to a high number of single vehicle crashes involving a car striking a tree or other rigid object, and severe head-on collisions.

What causes fatigue?

Sleep loss

Loss of sleep is one of the main, and most commonly known, causes of fatigue. Everyone has a basic sleep need. This can vary from person to person, but the average is seven to eight hours a day. If you don't get a full night's sleep, you're likely to be fatigued the following day. As little as two hours sleep loss on one occasion can affect reaction time, mental functioning, memory, mood and alertness.

Several nights of restricted sleep leads to a sleep debt. If you allow a sleep debt to get too large, the brain will eventually go to sleep involuntarily (micro-sleep), even if this puts you at risk.

Micro-sleeps generally only last a brief period, but can be very dangerous if they happen while you're driving. For example, if a driver has a micro-sleep for just one second while travelling at a speed of 70 mph, the car will have gone 100 feet without a driver in control.

Circadian rhythms

We have an in-built body clock in the brain, coordinating daily cycles known as circadian rhythms. The clock programs us to feel very sleepy between 3am and 5am, and to experience a secondary peak in sleepiness between 3pm and 5pm. At these times, you'll experience your worst physical and mental performance of the day. There's an increase in fatigue-related crashes at these times.